

Missouri rises to No. 1 on endangered rivers ranking

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WASHINGTON -- The Missouri River heads a list of the nation's 13 most endangered rivers in the 16th annual ranking from the environmental group, American Rivers.

The Missouri, America's longest river at 2,500 miles, moved from No. 2 in 2000 to No. 1 this year because of an upcoming decision on how the Army Corps of Engineers manages releases of water from its dams.

American Rivers favors a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposal that the corps change to a plan of releasing more water in the spring and reducing flow in the summer, mimicking the river's natural flow before dams harnessed its waters.

In the Dakotas and Montana, upstream of the dams, the changes would help three endangered or threatened species of birds and fish and benefit the \$90 million recreation industry. But states downstream along the Missouri and Mississippi rivers fear flooding and disruption to the \$7 million commercial barge industry, which transports farm products.

River flows that are more natural also could take an estimated \$30 million annual bite out of the region's hydropower industry, which could lead to higher rates. The Western Area Power Administration sells power from Missouri River dams to rural electric cooperatives and municipal utilities in the Dakotas, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana and Nebraska.

In June, the corps is supposed to release a draft revision of its current management plan, taking into account the Fish and Wildlife opinion. Then it will have six months of public hearings on the proposal in communities along the Missouri and Mississippi rivers.

"The Missouri moved to No. 1 this year because this is the point of no return," said Chad Smith, director of American Rivers' Missouri River field office in Lincoln, Neb. "People have to tell the corps this year to change dam operations or species extinction is in the near future of the Missouri River."

Paul Johnston, spokesman for the corps' Omaha District with headquarters in Omaha, Neb., said the agency has received plenty of comment already. Nine Mississippi River governors have written President Bush expressing opposition to the Fish and Wildlife proposal.

Five upper Missouri River senators have written the corps requesting an analysis of the impact of low river flows on the hydropower industry. The corps also has heard from farmers, marine operators and recreational boaters.

"American Rivers is exercising its constitutional right to influence the process," Johnston said. "There's a whole variety of folks trying to influence the process."

South Dakota's three-man congressional delegation is split over the issue.

Sens. Tom Daschle and Tim Johnson, both Democrats, favor the Fish and Wildlife proposal. Daschle fears that the corps is dragging its heels on revising the river-management plan and worries that Bush's proposed 14 percent cut in the corps' 2002 budget only will worsen the delay, spokesman Jay Carson said.

"The announcement by American Rivers is all the more motivation for the corps and the Bush administration to move this process along," Carson said. "Wildlife is perishing while we wait for the corps."

Bush has not named top officials to lead either Fish and Wildlife or the Army Corps of Engineers.

Rep. John Thune, a Republican, prefers a different river-management approach pushed by an association of governors of the eight states whose land is drained by the Missouri and two dozen Indian tribes. The Missouri River Basin Association wants to test the effect of natural flows on a 190-mile stretch of the river below Montana's Fort Peck dam before changing flows along the entire southern portion of the river.

That plan meets the needs of the recreation and hydropower industries but may not save the wildlife, so it doesn't satisfy Fish and Wildlife. The agency says current flows likely will lead to extinction of two endangered species -- the interior least tern and

pallid sturgeon -- and are jeopardizing a threatened bird, the piping plover.

"John (Thune) agrees that the Missouri River is a precious resource, and we should all be working together to save the species that live along the river and inside it," said Jafar Karim, his legislative director. "(But) there's a lot of other considerations that have to be taken into account, and we have to weigh them all very carefully."